DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 578 CS 215 942

AUTHOR Bidell, Thomas R.; Hubbard, Lady June; Weaver, Monica
TITLE Story Structure in a Sample of African-American Children: Evidence for a Cyclical Story Schema.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Washington, DC, April 3-5, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Cultural Traits; Elementary Education; Personal Narratives; Problem Solving; *Schemata (Cognition); *Story Grammar; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

A study examined the scripts or schemata--cognitive structures that represent story prototypes--used by African-American children and how they differ from story telling patterns of White middle-class children using a Western, linear "problem solving" story schemata. Samples of oral narratives were collected from 50 African-American children, ages 6-12 years, including personal narratives or "real life" stories and fantasy narratives. A group of African-American graduate students working with a White male researcher analyzed 15 personal narratives. Results indicated that none contained clear problem-solving sequences involving goals, obstacles, attempts to overcome objects, or resolutions typical of Western story schemata nor followed the linear problem-solving format consistently. Findings suggest that a cyclical structure was used in story development which differs from classic problem-solving schemata in the way relations among events and episodes are structured. Future research should be undertaken in the under-studied area of narrative research. (Contains 3 tables of data, 2 figures, and 13 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 410 578

Story Structure in a Sample of African-American Children:

Evidence for a Cyclical Story Schema

Thomas R. Bidell

Lady June Hubbard

Monica Weaver

Boston College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

T. Bidell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

CS215542

Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington DC, April 3-5, 1997.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Problem

Individuals tell and recall stories with the help of scripts or schemata--cognitive structures that represent story prototypes--serving as supports in interpreting, remembering, and constructing stories (Nelson, 1986; Rummelhart, 1975; Warren, Nicholas, & Trabasso, 1979). Culturally-oriented researchers have argued that prototypic story telling patterns differ across cultures (e.g., Gee, 1989; Heath, 1986a; Hicks, 1991). However, the vast majority of the psychological research describing the development of story schemata has been based on samples of white middle-class children and has used a Western, linear "problem-solving" model as a theoretical framework. In the present study, this gap was addressed by collecting a sample of African-American children's stories and subjecting them to a structural analysis by African-American researchers.

Subjects and Procedures

Two oral narratives, a personal narrative ("real life" story) and a fantasy narrative, were collected from a sample of 50 African-American children by two female African-American graduate students at an elementary school in Boston. Children ranged in age from 6 to 12 years, and sexes were balanced across age levels. Narratives were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Stories were analyzed by a group of African-American graduate students working with one white male researcher. A coding system was developed by parsing a sub-sample of stories into event units (agent-action-object representations) and discussing each unit in terms of its function in the story. Functional categories were developed and tested on subsequent stories, adjusting category definitions and adding categories, until a high level of coding reliability was reached.

Coding Categories

The categories of a story schema are derived from the primary *functions* that events play in stories. Therefore, the categories of the Western problem-solving schema reflect various problem-solving functions: initiating events, obstacles, attempts, reactions, outcomes. In contrast, the stories from our African-American sample did not depict goal-directed problem-solving sequences. Instead, they functioned to convey a particular theme through a gestalt-like "portrait" of events. Two levels of coding were developed: event unit coding and story component coding.

Event Unit Coding

Event units were defined as statements depicting a single action-agent-object. Five categories of event units were identified. Just as Action and Outcome events tend to dominate in problem-solving stories, two event unit categories--*Contextualizing Events* and *Focal Events*--made up the bulk of most stories sampled:

1. ***Contextualizing Events***. These are events that set a context for the listener to interpret an upcoming key story event. Four types were identified:

a) Context/Activity (CA). An event depicting an activity which provides a context for an upcoming event.

b) Context/Location (CL). An event which provides information about the location of characters or other events in space or time.

c) Contextualizing/Emotion (CE). An event which provides information about a character's emotional state as context for an upcoming event.

d) Context/Description (CD). An event which provides information about qualities of persons, places, objects, or events, as context for an upcoming event.

2. ***Focal Events***. These are key story events which bring closure to a set of one or more contextualizing events, completing a theme or sub-theme.

In addition to these two primary types of events, three less commonly used categories were identified:

3. ***Theme Statement*** (TS). An explicit statement of what the story is "about."

4. ***Character Introduction*** (CI). A general statement about a character's qualities, not serving to contextualize a specific focal event.

5. ***Metalinguistic Commentary*** (MC). Comments about the tellers own story-telling process which do not contribute to the content of the story.

Story Component Coding

Just as Western story schemata are organized into larger units composed of event strings (e.g., PROBLEM, ATTEMPT(S), RESOLUTION), many of the stories sampled were organized into larger story components containing sets of contextualizing events and focal events. These units were defined as follows.

1. Engagement. A series of events that serves to (a) introduce a story pattern or theme that will later be developed or expanded, and (b) establish a connection with the listener.

2. Amplification. A series of events that builds on a previously introduced theme by repeating it with variation or expansion.

3. Culmination. A series of events that serves to complete a theme or pattern by providing a final

variation or expansion that reflects back of the rest of the story, illuminating the story's meaning as a whole.

4. Preface. A few stories had a series of initial statements in which theme statements or character introduction events were contained.

Results

To date, 15 of the personal narratives and none of the fantasy narratives have been analyzed. None of these 15 stories contained clear problem-solving sequences involving goals, obstacles, attempts to overcome objects, or resolutions, typical of Western story schemata (see Stein & Glenn, 1979). Although many individual features of the stories could be interpreted as a "problem" or an "outcome," we found that, as wholes, none of the stories followed the linear problem solving format in a consistent way (see Figure 1a&b for schematic comparison). The coding system outlined above was developed to describe what appeared to be a cyclical structure in which the story is developed through cycles of repetition in which each story component refers back to this theme and amplifies it (Figure 1b) instead of driving forward to a problem resolution (Figure 1 a). The engagement introduces a pattern or theme, the amplification repeats and varies the theme allowing for implications to be drawn, and the culmination, creates a gestalt-like closure, illuminating the meaning of the whole story. Instead of an *action-obstacle* or *action-outcome* structure, the event structure of episodes consists of *contextualizing events* leading up to and creating a meaningful framework for *focal events* (significant actions or occurrences).

The cyclical structure is illustrated in Table 1, which shows one of the children's stories parsed and coded into event units and story components. Table 2 compares one of the cyclically structured stories with a version of the same story "re-written" to conform with Western linear

story structure. Note the differences in purpose, meaning, and audience effect. The linear story (Table 2) conveys a problem in terms of a goal (to go to Disney World) and an obstacle (father refuses), which is resolved through a sequence of direct attempts. The story seems to tell us, "Here is how I got to go to Disney land." In contrast, the cyclical story introduces a theme with a strong emotional content (being disappointed by adults), expands on this same theme, then closes with a final repetition of the theme which seems to clinch the message: "Here is how it feels to be let down."

Table 3 presents a more complex example of a cyclical story structure. Note that each of the three story components is constructed out of a series of contextualizing events or comments which seem to "lead up" to a focal event. In each case the focal event involves a loose tooth. Although superficially this story could be interpreted as presenting a problem and solution (tooth is loose; tooth comes out), it is not really constructed with a goal, obstacles, or direct attempts at overcoming obstacles. Instead, the story presents a theme (I got a loose tooth), expands on the theme (the loose tooth made it hard to eat), and then closes with a twist that recasts the story revealing an additional side of the theme (After all that trouble with my tooth, finally it was over). Although the story certainly has a build-up and a central tension, it does not conform well to the classic problem-solving schema.

However, there are some structural similarities between the cyclical structures described in these stories, and the classic problem-solving schema, as revealed by the story grammar analysis in Figure 2. Both schemata include a beginning, development, and ending. But they differ in the way relations among events and episodes are structured (linear v. reflexive), as shown above. Note that some of the stories we collected had initial statements similar to a setting. We have called this

a preface because it seems to serve a different function--one of connecting the story with the audience ("this about my tooth") rather than a distancing function ("once upon a time; far, far away"). However, this difference may be a artifact of using personal as opposed to fantasy narrative.

Discussion

Clearly, no conclusions can be drawn from such highly preliminary analyses. In presenting these findings, we hope to stimulate discussion and generate feedback on a very under-studied area of narrative research. Given the immense volume of narrative research, the virtual absence of basic data on the way narrative structure develops in African-American, Latino, Asian, and other non-white populations is disturbing and represents a significant gap in the research literature on child development. This gap could have important practical consequences. Previous educational researchers (Heath, 1986b; Michaels, 1981) have suggested that mismatches between culturally different narrative styles may interfere with school success among some African-American children. Much more basic research, of the kind presented here, is needed to determine whether cultural diversity leads to diversity in the development of narrative structure, and to describe the form and trajectory of any such developmental differences.

References

Bamberg, M. G. W. (1987). The acquisition of narratives: Learning to use language. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Gee, J. P. (1989). Commonalities and differences in narrative construction. Discourse Processes, 12, 287-307.

Heath, S. B. (1986a). Taking a cross-cultural look at narratives. Topics in Language Disorders, 7(1), 84-94.

Heath, S. B. (1986b). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and at school. In B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), Language socialization across cultures.

Hicks, D. (1991). Kinds of narrative: Genre skills among first graders from two communities. 55-87. In A. McCabe and C. Peterson (Eds.), Developing narrative structure. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Mandler, J. M., & Johnson, N. S. (1977). Remembrance of things parsed: Story structure and recall. Cognitive Psychology, 9, 111-151.

Michaels, S. (1981). "Sharing time": Children's narrative styles and differential access to literacy. Language in Society, 10, 423-442.

Nelson, K. (1986). Event knowledge and cognitive development in K. Nelson's Event knowledge: Structure and function in development. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986.

Peterson, C. & McCabe, A. (1983). Developmental psycholinguistics: Three ways of

looking at a child's narrative. New York: Premium, 1983.

Rummelhart, D. E. (1975). Notes on a schema for stories. In D. G. Bobrow, & A. Collins (Eds.), Representation and understanding. New York: Academic Press.

Stein, N. L. (1979). How children understand stories: A developmental analysis. In L. G. Katz (Ed.), Current topics in early childhood education (Vol. 2). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Stein, N. L. & Glenn, C. G. (1979). An analysis of story comprehension in elementary school children. In R. O. Freedle (Ed.), New Directions in Discourse Processing. Norwood, NJ: Albex, 1979

Warren, W. H.; Nicholas, D. W.; Trabasso, T. (1979). Event chains and inferences in understanding narratives. In R. Freedle (Ed.), Advances in Discourse Processes (Vol. 2). Norwood, NJ: Albex, 1979.

Table 1. Example of Simple Cyclically Structured Story (Real)

Story Component	Event Unit		Event Unit Code
Engagement	1.	Once my Mommy said she was gonna take me to the park.	CA
	2.	**And then she said- then she- then she said that she wasn't really gonna take me.**	**FE**
Amplification	3.	And then my Daddy said he was gonna take me to Disney world.	CA
	4.	**And he didn't really take me.**	**FE**
Culmination	5.	So I- so I went with my other Daddy.	CA
	6.	**And then, and then, my real Daddy doesn't let me go anywhere**	**FE**

Table 2. Cyclical Story "Re-Written" in Linear Story Schema (Hypothetical)

Story Component	Event Unit		Event Unit Code
Problem	1.	Last summer, I wanted to go to Disney World	GOAL
	2.	But my Mommy wouldn't take me.	OBSTACLE
Attempt	3.	So I asked my Daddy	ACTION
	4.	But he would take me either	OBSTACLE
Resolution	5.	So then I asked my other Daddy	ACTION
	6.	and he took me.	OUTCOME

Table 3. Example of Event Unit Coding and Story Component Coding

Story Component	Event Unit	Event Unit Code
ENGAGEMENT	1. I'm Marcia	MC
	2. I'm gonna tell something about my tooth.	TS
	3. One day when I was at my cousin's house,	CL
	4. When I went um to a room that's very little,	CL
	5. my cousin- my cousin hit me in the mouth	CA
	6. and- and my tooth start to wiggle and start to come out	**FE**
AMPLIFICATION	7. And I went upstairs in my house	CL
	8. and then I asked- I was eating.	CA
	9. I asked my mother "can I eat Cheerio?"	CA
	10. She said "Yes."	CA
	11. And I went to eat it	CA
	12. And then I started eating it	CA
	13. And I didn't want it	CE
	14. Cause my tooth was loose	**FE**
CULMINATION	15. and- and then- and then my mother say "Come and lay down and sleep."	CA
	16. I said "OK,"	CA
	17. and I went to sleep.	CA
	18. And a little boy came to my house	CA
	19. and I woked up.	CA
	20. He was about to eat my food.	CA
	21. I didn't want my mother to let 'im eat my food.	CE
	22. And then I ate- and then I ate my food.	CA
	23. And then my tooth came out.	**FE**

Figure 1. Cyclical story schema compared with linear story schema. Cyclical stories build up a "picture" by repeating and varying a theme; linear stories depict a sequential set of actions leading from problem to resolution.

Linear Story Schema
(Based on white middle-class subjects)

[SETTING] PROBLEM==>ATTEMPT(S)==>RESOLUTION

Cyclical Story Schema
(Observed in sample of African-American children)

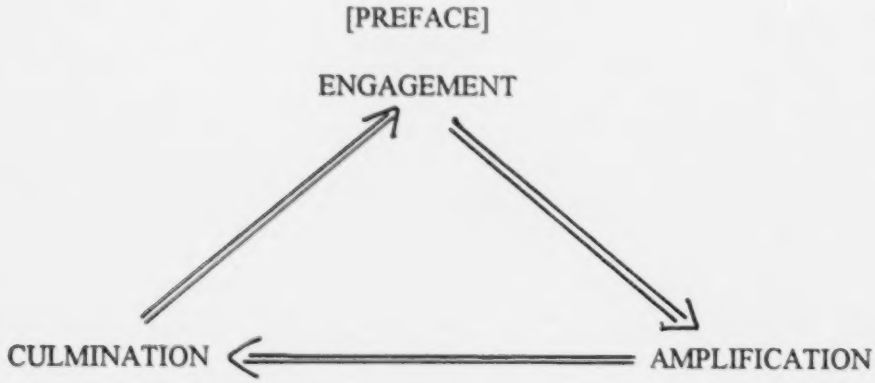
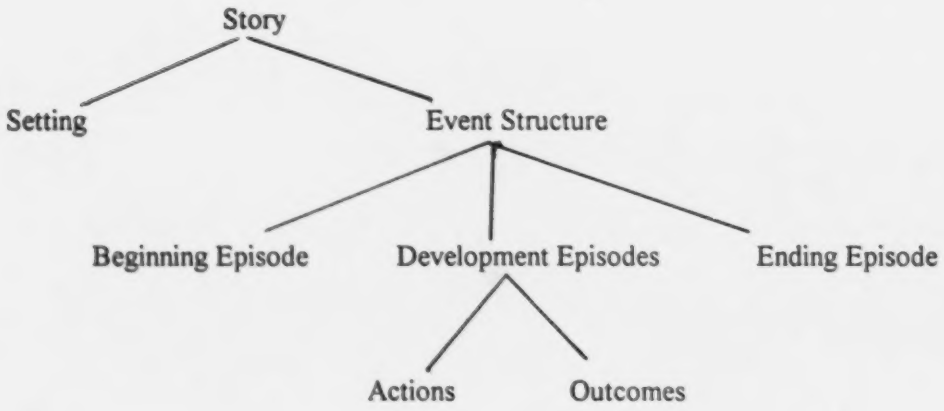


Figure 2. Comparison of story grammar analyses for cyclical and linear story schemata showing equality of structural complexity.

A. Western Linear Story Structure (after Mandler & Johnson, 1977)



B. Cyclical Story Structure